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Award-Winning Farmer Bullish on Government Programs

Paul Post, New York Correspondent Updated Aug 26, 2016



Many people believe government is too big, far-reaching and burdensome, especially in New York, one of the highest-taxed states in the country.

But Tom Wickham, 77, a ninth-generation Suffolk County fruit grower, has a different take on things. He gives full credit to a variety of local, state and federally funded programs and agencies that have helped him make significant improvements in recent years.

Wickham was recognized with the 2016 Agricultural Environmental Management Award at the recent Empire Farm Days in Seneca Falls.

The owner of Wickham's Fruit Farm said such an honor would never have been possible without the support and assistance that he gets from Suffolk County Cooperative Extension, the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office, and locally funded farmland protection programs.

"They have helped us achieve a higher level of production and environmental stewardship," Wickham said. "These things never would have been implemented and we never would have been recognized if they weren't out here working steadily and effectively to help. All I did was pick up on some of these programs. I went up there to Seneca Falls to tell people that I am a beneficiary and to advocate for them."

It explains why he's optimistic about farming's future while some segments of New York agriculture, such as dairy, are in the midst of tough financial times.

The award, which also recognized Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, was presented by the Department of Agriculture & Markets, Empire State Potato Growers, and American Agriculturist magazine.

The Suffolk Soil and Water Conservation District has an active agricultural environmental management program that has assisted more than 278 farms since its inception. The district focuses on assisting farmers with programs that help protect Long Island's sole source aquifer, which provides drinking water to more than 2.7 million people.

The district has administered grants for programs such as fuel tank replacement, nutrient management planning, pesticide sprayer retrofits and the installation of agrichemical handling facilities.

The Wickham farm was one of the first 50 farms to receive an agricultural environmental management comprehensive farm plan in 1999.

The farm includes 175 acres with most acres devoted to fruits such as apples, peaches and cherries. The farm also raises small fruits and vegetables.

A retail farmstand generates about half the farm's income, another 25 percent comes from you-pick apples, and the rest comes from delivery to specialty markets such as gourmet grocery stores and food distributors.

"We specialize in quality so we get a little better price," Wickham said. "Our fruit is picked and packed so people can eat it the same day."

In recent years, Wickham has acquired two other farms he previously leased. He credits local town and county-funded land preservation programs for giving him the revenue needed to make this possible. Land values on eastern Long Island are quite high, so he couldn't have afforded it otherwise.

Wickham previously spent 20 years working overseas, primarily in Asia, as director of the International Irrigation Management Institute, a consortium funded by several sources including the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

He came home to take over the family business and has already made plans for turning it over to his son, Jonathan. Succession planning is one of the biggest challenges to the future of farming, Wickham said.

"There is considerable government and public support for farming these days," he said. "There's a reservoir of goodwill and a growing acceptance for local farm produce. That's really significant."

"The challenge is maintaining the interest of the next generation," he added. "I talked to a number of other growers in Seneca Falls. If you have a son or daughter who makes \$75,000 off the farm, how can you possibly attract that person back into a farming business?"

Instead of a steady, stable income, agriculture is fraught with unknowns and the likelihood of losses, he said.

It's one reason he said he is thankful for government cost-share programs that have helped him with a variety of projects. Specifically, one program paid for half the cost of a new low-emission diesel engine for his irrigation system.

The soil and water conservation district helped fund three new diesel fuel tanks to prevent the possibility of groundwater contamination.

Another program helped him obtain slow-release fertilizer for sweet corn. This has greatly reduced seepage of nitrogen into Peconic Bay, which surrounds his farm.

Also, Wickham was able to install a new weather station that lets him pinpoint the best time to spray for Oriental fruit moth. Instead of a hit-and-miss proposition, such spraying is now much more effective, reducing its cost and environmental impact.

In addition, the farm has also installed a seasonal high tunnel that is used to grow cherry trees. The high tunnel is a greenhouse-type structure that does not require any additional heating. Instead, it uses the sun's energy to produce ideal growing conditions, maximizing the growth of the plant.

"There are these programs and they do work," he said. "I have to say I really am grateful for the support these particular agencies have given me."

Paul Post is a freelance writer in eastern New York. He can be reached at paulpostLF20160820N_post-LI-farmer-02-03

Photo courtesy of Jake Rajs

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Workers busy at Wickham's Fruit Farm on Long Island earlier this spring. The farm's owner, Tom Wickham, was recognized with the 2016 Agricultural Environmental Management Award at this year's Empire Farm Days.

Photo courtesy of the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets

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Tom Wickham, second from left, accepts the Agricultural Environmental Management Award at Empire Farm Days. Pictured with him are Corey Humphrey, district manager of the Suffolk County Soil and Water Conservation District, far left; Gary Mahany, Empire State Potato Growers Inc., to Wickham's right; Sharon Frost; and Jackie Czub, deputy commissioner of the New York State Department of Agriculture & Markets.